

*“It is  
more than gold  
to me”*



Mary Louisa Duncan Putnam  
and the  
Davenport Academy  
of Natural Sciences

*by Scott Roller*

**O**n a cold February afternoon in 1903, citizens of Davenport, Iowa, filled the Davenport Academy of Sciences to pay their last respects to Mary Louisa Duncan Putnam. For more than 25 years she had devoted much of her energies to establishing the institution both as an educational center and as a memorial to her son Joseph Duncan Putnam. In the process she had walked the delicate line of 19th-century gender barriers, fulfilling her expected role as nurturer and educator of her children while also publicly raising funds, organizing events, and publishing the proceedings of the fledgling academy. In the end, she earned prominence in her community as a social leader while maintaining its re-



spect for her as a woman, as defined and dictated by the times.

Born in 1832 to Elizabeth Caldwell Smith Duncan and Joseph Duncan (a four-time congressman), Mary Louisa Duncan spent most of her childhood in Jacksonville, Illinois. There, in a community largely dominated by transplanted New Englanders, she was raised in a politically influential family with strong Presbyterian values. Following a single term as governor, her father left politics. Then, a poor business deal coupled with his early and unexpected death in 1844 left his invalid wife and their seven children with the family home but little else. As the eldest daughter, eleven-year-old Mary learned how to manage a large household, perform most of the chores herself.

During the mid-1840s, after a family friend had helped rebuild the family's financial base, Mary accompanied her mother on several trips to Washington. There, they rekindled old friendships made during her father's terms in the House of Representatives and dined at the White House. Later recounting her visits as a teenager to the home of former First Lady Dolley Madison, Mary wrote, "I was enraptured with Mrs. Madison,—lovely Mrs. Madison! It was a delight to us young people to pay our respects to her very often, when she received us in turbaned cap, with the dignity of a princess, and with the urbanity of a truly loyal American woman." These travels also allowed Mary to visit the new Smithsonian Institution and other museums,

where she developed a deep appreciation for history, science, and the arts. The trips also exposed her to a wide range of personalities, from those in high society to the common laborers she met on the

Two years later, on a family trip to the East, she met her future husband, Charles E. Putnam, and they became engaged. Mary convinced Charles to abandon his plans to move to New York City and instead to begin a law practice in the West. Following her wishes, he located in Davenport, Iowa, in the spring of 1854. The couple was married at a small ceremony that December at Jacksonville and settled in Davenport soon afterwards.

Mary gave birth to their first son, Joseph Duncan Putnam, in October 1855. While Charles spent long hours away from home building his practice, Mary Putnam fulfilled the role expected of a 19th-century wife. She expertly managed the family home, eventually bore eleven children (all were boys but one), and devoted herself to their upbringing. In a letter to her mother dated January 10, 1856, Mary wrote of her obligations to her children: "Our childhood joys cannot be taken from us & their impression is stamped on our character forever—blessed is the man or woman who has had a cheerful happy home once in their lives."

By 1863 Charles's growing law practice and prosperous business ventures permitted the family to move into a large home, known as "Woodlawn," on the west edge of Davenport. The estate's 18 acres of rolling grounds featured both pasture land and wooded areas, providing a fascinating natural learning environment for the children. Both parents steadfastly encouraged their chil-

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Mary and Charles E. Putnam, circa 1855.

*"I am to have a very small wedding & take the money that would thus be expended to furnish our room comfortably in Davenport."*

journey. Such experiences helped Mary develop social graces in varied situations, which she would use to her advantage later in life.

Mary graduated from the Jacksonville Female Academy in 1851.





Putnam family members at Woodlawn, circa 1865-1870.

*"A young lady visiting here said I had the most delightful home in Davenport. I felt it was indeed the truth."*

—Mary Putnam, January 1864

dren's education by urging them to explore all aspects of life and by reading to them daily. In January 1863, for example, Mary wrote to her mother that she had read from the *New York Observer* "all that could interest the children." She noted, "The red ants seem to take Duncan. Oh, mother! what a luxury to have boys old enough to appreciate what you read to them! I have so much pleasure in watch-

ing the development of Duncan's mind. My whole days are spent in instructing, playing with, and keeping the children clean. I sew scarcely a stitch and fear my industry will flag; however, I never was so busy in my life—or more happy."

As the boisterous family continued to grow—Putnam called them her "blue-eyed banditti"—Woodlawn developed into an ever

more enriching atmosphere for the children, with object lessons from nature (based on German educator Friedrich Froebel's approaches), outdoor sports, gardening, an excellent library (Charles had assembled one of the finest west of the Mississippi), a stage for plays, a workshop, and even a printing press.

With such diverse opportunities for education, coupled with



the family's influential political heritage, much was expected from the Putnam children. As a mother, Mary Putnam knew that it was her responsibility to give them a strong cultural and moral upbringing so they would mature into leaders in society. Nevertheless, she often doubted her maternal abilities. In an 1866 letter to her brother she confided, "What a responsibility rests upon me, I feel it daily more & more yet pray God my life may be spared until these dear ones shall need my governing will no longer."

**F**rom early childhood, Duncan, the firstborn, rarely enjoyed good health. When he was only three years old, Mary wrote of her concerns for his health, saying that although he "plays out doors all day long—the body has occasional sick turns—would to God he could be well dear beautiful boy. I tremble when I think how much he loves me that he should be taken from me hence [through illness]." Duncan received much of his education at home due to his physical inability to attend school on a regular basis. Less suited for sports than his brothers, he took an early interest in catching and raising butterflies and moths at Woodlawn, and then in collecting, observing, drawing, and classifying all kinds of insects. As he entered adolescence, his mother realized she could serve but limited use to him as he developed his interests in the natural sciences, especially his strong affinity toward the



Six of the eleven Putnam children, April 1867 (clockwise from bottom): George Rockwell, H. St. Clair, Joseph Duncan, John Caldwell, Charles Morgan, and William Clement.

*"My whole days are spent in instructing, playing with, and keeping the children clean."*

—Mary Putnam, January 1863

study of insects. But she encouraged him wholeheartedly to pursue his scientific passions.

By 1869, W. H. Pratt, Duncan's penmanship instructor and a member of the year-old Davenport Academy of Natural Sciences, also noted the boy's interest in the natural sciences. Pratt allowed Duncan to accompany him on weekend collecting expeditions in

the area, introduced him to the work of the academy, and encouraged him to join this small group of amateur local scientists. When Duncan expressed his interest in the group to his mother, she immediately set about joining with her son and husband. By July of that year Mary, Duncan, and Charles Putnam had been elected as members.

The Davenport Academy of Natural Sciences was fairly typical of 19th-century midwestern academic societies. According to Daniel Goldstein, who has studied the history of such institutions, "Before scientists made a home for themselves in the universities toward the end of the nineteenth century, state and local societies were the principal scientific institutions throughout most of the country. In these voluntary associations, or academies as they were frequently called, men—and, more rarely, women—with national and international reputations as scientists interacted with other, less skilled and knowledgeable enthusiasts." Goldstein adds: "Wherever even a handful of 'scientific men' could be found, they were sure to form a society. Most of these organizations were ephemeral, attesting more to the enthusiasm of their founders than to the widespread existence of sustained local scientific activity."

As an enthusiastic new member whose interest would be far from ephemeral, 13-year-old Duncan Putnam carefully recorded in his pocket journal these notations: "July 9th, 1869, I attended for the first time to-night, having been



elected a member of the Davenport Academy of Natural Sciences which holds its regular meetings the last Friday of each month. Father went with me. This was an adjourned meeting to discuss the methods to be used in raising the funds to take photographs of the great eclipse next August; and to hear the report of the committee appointed on the same subject, but no definite action could be taken, so the meeting adjourned til next Friday evening, at 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> o'clock."

The election of Duncan, Mary, and Charles Putnam as members forever changed the course of the Davenport academy. Mary Putnam's membership represented the first time a woman had been elected into the group as a regular member. Initially, she remained largely inactive in the business of the academy, leaving Duncan's scientific education to Pratt and his associates. Her membership seems to have been based on her son's wish that she become a member and on her family's social position in the community.

In 1872, the Putnams' tenth child, Hamilton, still an infant, died of scarlet fever. While the loss of a child was not uncommon for 19th-century women, the death nonetheless devastated Mary Putnam and she redoubled her efforts in the education of her remaining children. Hamilton's death also increased her fears that frail Duncan would be taken from her, too.

**B**y the early 1870s Duncan's health problems had become increasingly acute. "Death loves a shining mark, hence I feel his aim directed to my boy [Duncan]," wrote Mary Putnam to her brother in the fall of 1871. In the same letter she noted that her husband had taken Dun-

can out west, "I hope he [Charles] will try every thing before bringing him home to die—I shall have no hope to keep him with me in this climate." Believing that a more favorable climate might remedy Duncan's condition, his family sent him on several extended trips to California, Colorado, and other western locations, despite the expense. In 1872, he managed to incorporate his scientific pursuits into his convalescence by accompanying fellow academy member and nationally respected botanist C. C. Parry on his summer botanical excursion to Colorado. He also served as a meteorological assistant on an Army Corps of Engineers' Yellowstone expedition the following year.

By the start of 1874, however, it became evident that the western climate had not substantially improved Duncan's health. In fact, tuberculosis was now diagnosed, shattering plans for him to attend Harvard. On New Year's Day, Mary wrote: "Tomorrow night the children will go through their play of William Tell. Mr. Putnam insists on making the home lively and pleasant for Duncan as long as he is with us. . . . He had a hemorrhage in the street the day before yesterday, which alarmed us all very much."

On January 21, she noted: "I leave Duncan scarcely a moment night or day. His father sits with him sometimes while I do some errands. I don't know what to do with him. If he sits still he reads Huxley and Darwin and all the other brain-splitting books you ever heard of—says histories are almost as heavy and stupid as novels. He was actually relieved when we were through David Copperfield. I suppose while he lives he will work."

On January 30: "Duncan is

anxious to go with Dr. Parry to Utah next summer, as it is on the desert and near the mountains, so he can catch all kinds of bugs. Oh, that God would spare his life that he may fulfill his great promise."

On February 4: "Duncan has been very ill. I have had no heart to write. To-day he is back in his bug room which makes him and me more cheerful. This is the fourteenth hemorrhage in six days. I have not left Duncan a moment day or night; how long I can hold out I don't know."

**T**he crisis passed, but Duncan's general health did not improve. By the fall of that year the 19-year-old weighed only 117 pounds. While visiting Duncan in Empire, Colorado, in August 1874, Mary sadly wrote her husband that "his cough sounds to me more hollow & deeper, his expectorations are dark yellow and a great deal—he stoops more." Yet even with his health in continual decline, Duncan remained focused and confident in his abilities. In October 1874 he wrote to his mother that "there are plenty of good positions to be had for a Naturalist properly qualified on the various surveys & in the colleges—I am tolerably well qualified for the former & think that very likely I can get some such position—even next year if I am well enough."

By the end of the year, however, Duncan finally began to accept that his health would not permit him to pursue his goals through traditional means. He now dedicated himself to building the Davenport Academy of Natural Sciences into a respected institution beyond the Midwest and within the international scientific community. This was not a naive



goal during a time when the advancement of science depended on students of all levels. As historian Daniel Goldstein explains, "American scientists were not clearly defined as a professional group in the Nineteenth Century in the way that they are today. While there was a clear hierarchy within the scientific community, it was not possible to draw a firm line between scientists and non-scientists, between those who contributed to the field and those who did not. This was especially true for the natural sciences. The United States' most important botanists, geologists and zoologists, for example, communicated with and relied on the efforts of a large number of less skilled or less sophisticated part-time workers."

Duncan enlisted his mother's help, urging her to do something "to make the Academy popular." He also told her that he felt obligated to make his own way. "I have made up my mind to earn my own living after two years," he wrote to her in the fall of 1874, "even if I have to give up Nat[ural] History." As Mary watched Duncan's commitment to the academy heighten, she increased her own involvement in its functions and devoted herself to its success. She hoped that by strengthening the academy, she could help her son gain the training and experience needed to become a renowned scientist without leaving Davenport.

Shortly after hearing Duncan's plea to help the academy, Putnam suffered the loss of her infant son, Berthoud, on February 11, 1875. At the age of 43 years she would bear no more children. Without an infant to rear, life seemed empty. She concentrated her energies on educating her remaining children, and on the academy as a way to deal with her grief. So much time did

she begin to devote to the academy, in fact, that she sometimes called it her twelfth child.

Putnam saw her foremost role as one of raising funds to support the efforts of the academy's scientifically oriented members, especially the efforts of her son. To do so, she drew on her previous experience as secretary of Davenport's Soldiers Aid Society during the Civil War. She organized a group of women to furnish a room in her husband's law office where the academy could hold its meetings. Next she nominated eleven women for membership, hoping this would broaden community interest in the academy and, in turn, encourage donations for constructing a fireproof building to house its collections. She urged other academy members to join her. "Now while the enthusiasm is freshly awakened," she said, "we must not let it die." No doubt she had Duncan in mind when she remarked, "I like the plan of endowing the institution so as to secure some one to spend all of his time there."

In September 1875, Putnam began the next phase of her work for Duncan and the academy when she helped organize the initial meeting of Davenport's Ladies' Centennial Association. With the nation's Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia less than a year away, she asked the women to select a project to exhibit in the exposition's "Woman's Pavilion." Many women's organizations across the country were planning to send samples of their handiwork as their projects.

Meanwhile, Duncan introduced a resolution to the academy membership to publish the institution's proceedings and scientific

papers. He outlined the advantages of launching such a journal: to "preserve much material that might otherwise be lost," to "furnish a greater incentive to our members to make original investigations," to "increase the Library by means of exchange with other societies and publishers," and to "place us on a creditable footing with the other societies of the world." His mother followed up by suggesting that the Ladies' Centennial Association sponsor the publication as its project for the exposition, to show the world how much scientific work the growing city of Davenport was producing.

During the first half of 1876 Mary Putnam devoted almost all of her spare hours to the publication fund. She firmly believed that whenever Duncan's health declined, her fundraising and other work for the academy helped to prolong his life. As she told a friend, "Nothing but the publication keeps him alive."

In the process of publishing the volume, Putnam followed the traditional example of benevolent societies, in which women expanded their spheres of influence into public life through moral and educational pursuits. Despite a \$1,500 setback caused by a fire in a hall rented for a fundraising event in February, and the death of her mother in June, Putnam led the Ladies' Centennial Association to successful completion of the project. As a result of her organizational skills, Davenport's women proved their merit as fundraisers.

To reward their work, and to ensure their continued efforts for the academy, she had nominated 43 women for election into the academy in 1875, more than half of the new members for the year. Their election marked a move toward a more populist academy and



away from an exclusive circle of scientifically oriented men.

The centennial project—volume one of the academy proceedings—comprised nearly 300 pages and 35 illustrations. The material had been compiled and edited by the publications committee and included organizational information (such as bylaws, acquisitions and membership lists, speeches, and minutes), and members' research findings (on local geology, botany, archeology, and so forth). Duncan offered several of his lists and descriptions of insects collected in Iowa and out west, as well as a brief article on the maple bark louse.

The success of volume one of the academy's proceedings buoyed Mary Putnam's hopes that Duncan could remain in Davenport and still achieve respect as a scientist by making useful contributions to his field. Indeed, the initial volume did result in many American and European scientists offering their congratulations on the academy's efforts, and many sent their own publications in exchange, which greatly bolstered the academy's research library. As the publications committee reported, the proceedings had "brought us into active communication with nearly

all similar societies throughout the world. By means of exchanges, our Library has been greatly increased, already 121 complete volumes and 351 pamphlets and parts of volumes have been received. . . . Scarcely a day passes but some new book is received." And as the year's retiring president reminded members, "No [academic] society can work independently of others. Without their aid we may be toiling and plodding on problems which they solved years ago. . . . [Exchanging publications enables] us

Mrs. Sanders, to procure "subscriptions" (pledges or donations) for construction. When Sanders could not fulfill her duties, however, Putnam raised the funds single-handedly.

Putnam supplemented this fundraising with an informal reception called a "kettle drum" at the family's Woodlawn estate on July 17, 1877. Perfect weather, orchestra music, abundant food, "gypsy" fortune-



Kettle drum festival, July 17, 1877.

*"The expectations of all were more than realized in the real enjoyment of the hundreds who were privileged to be present at Woodlawn. . . . Strasser's orchestra rendered the programme . . . and the first few hours were whiled away by the merry dancers on the lawn."*

—Davenport Daily Democrat, July 18, 1877

to compare our best work with others—to do honest, permanent work." Upon Mary Putnam's urging, the academy almost immediately began planning volume two of the proceedings, which Duncan volunteered to undertake as his own responsibility.

Meanwhile Mary Putnam began to campaign for a new, fireproof building for the exclusive use of the academy. By February of 1877 she had convinced her longtime friend Patience Veile Newcomb to donate a lot near downtown Davenport as the building site. Out of respect for previous successes, and because most of the male members had little interest in fundraising, the academy appointed Putnam and another woman member, a

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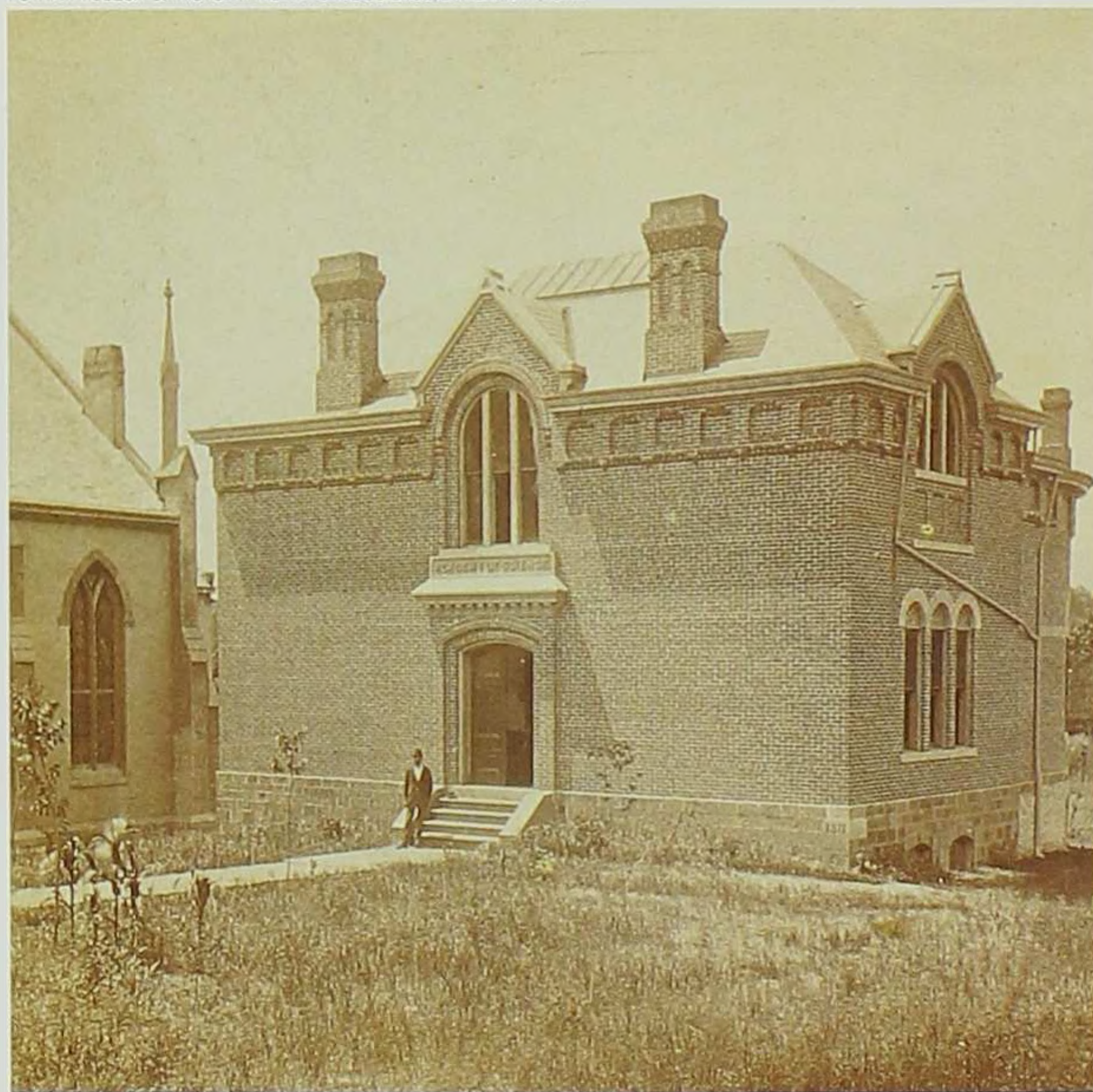


tellers, and other assorted attractions drew a crowd of more than 700 and raised \$800 of the building's total cost of \$4,500 in a single day. The festival was so successful in fact, that just two days later the building committee reported in favor of construction. On February 22, 1878, only a year after the donation of the land, the new Davenport Academy of Natural Sciences building opened to the public.

Over the next year Putnam and her corps of women fundraisers furnished the interior of the building by acquiring donations of materials and money through additional community events. Duncan's wish for his mother to do something "to make the Academy popular" had been realized—so much so, in fact, that its scientific functions had taken on a secondary importance to all but a few of the academy's dedicated amateur scientists. Mary Putnam had made it fashionable to attend academy events. As Duncan wrote to a colleague, the academy had become "the most 'popular' institution in the city—of whatever nature & that is saying a good deal for a town like Davenport."

Putnam's fundraising and organizational efforts resulted in her election as president of the Davenport Academy of Natural Sciences in 1879. She was the first woman elected to that position. An extremely rare appointment for any woman at the time, this marked the academy's public acknowledg-

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Davenport Academy of Sciences, circa 1895.

*"This is to be a house of industry, a school of the sciences, a garden for culture, a home for all virtues."*

—Academy President Rev. S. S. Hunting

ment of respect for its women members and their efforts. In his nomination speech for Putnam, C. C. Parry noted their contributions: "It is quite unnecessary to explain to any here present that the actual success and present prosperity of the Academy has been coincident with the interest taken in it by woman. It was a Woman's Centennial Association that first inaugurated and successfully carried out the publication of Proceedings, on which, more than any other one thing, the scientific character and standing of the Academy abroad has been firmly established. The very ground beneath our feet is the spontaneous gift of a generous woman, and this commodious building, which affords us a permanent home, from lowest foundation

stone to highest roof-crest, if not the direct work of woman's hand, has been wrought out and completed under the inspiring influence of a woman's heart. It has been proposed, and I doubt not will meet the spontaneous approval of all present, to recognize this obligation in a very appropriate way as well as adding a crowning glory to the institution, by electing MRS. C. E. PUTNAM President of the Academy for the ensuing year."

Putnam appreciated the honor, but she also understood the kind of tedious detail and exhausting leg-work that fundraising and promotion required. While promoting a musical benefit by a touring pianist in

May 1879, she listed some of the tasks: "From day to day I haunted the editorial chairs, buttonholed the local editors, made journeys [across the Mississippi] to Rock Island and back again, had tickets printed at one office, placards at another, and the programmes at a third. These tickets I was very judicious with, giving some fifty to the editors, and about as many more to music teachers and those promising to interest their pupils. The placards I took to Rock Island, left them with a friend who saw four of them put in the street cars. (We sold four tickets in Rock Island). . . . The other placards I took in my buggy and put in front of windows, and sent John to street car lines to have others put in cards. This was no small part of the work, for the next



morning after leaving them they did not appear; so I had to see first one driver and then another about it."

Even as Putnam's successes mounted at the academy, however, Duncan remained in poor health, and the family in poor finances. By February 1879, the Putnams had mortgaged Woodlawn and Mary performed her own housework in an effort to economize. Then came the unexpected death of their third-born son, John.

John had been plagued by poor eyesight throughout his life, and his mother had devoted long hours during his childhood schooling to read his lessons to him, hoping that he could go east to college where, she believed, "he is going to make a splendid scholar." With Duncan too ill to lead the family into the next generation, John no doubt felt added pressure to succeed. Yet when he began his studies at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1877, he no longer had his mother to help him with his reading. Feeling ostracized at school and unable to meet what he perceived as his family's expectations, he gradually became depressed. Finally the pressures became too great. He committed suicide on May 27, 1879, at the age of 20.

The death of a third son, this time as an adult whom she believed had been on his way to success, no doubt shook Mary Putnam's confidence in her abilities as a mother. After a period of mourning, she again devoted herself to the academy, but she accomplished less that year than she had hoped for. She regretted that she did not better represent the women members of the academy,

and in her end-of-the-year presidential address she apologized: "In gratefully accepting the position [as president] as a tribute to my sex, I had hoped and expected to make up for any lack of scientific qualifications by zeal and enthusiasm in behalf of your great work, and if the performance has fallen short of the promise, you will, I am sure, attribute my shortcomings to the dark experiences through whose shadows I have been passing."

Still, Putnam's year as president did mark the beginning of the academy's work as a local educational institution in the natural sciences for public schools. Convincing C. C. Parry to serve as its instructor, she arranged a botany class for schoolchildren. She also arranged several popular lectures and informal discussions, hoping to expand the academy's role in the community.

Meanwhile, Duncan "insisted upon paying his board" by working in his father's law office, "feeling such an example would be better for his brothers," his mother explained. Unfortunately, his duties as office clerk proved too much for his fragile physical condition, and his health declined even further. In a letter to her brother in late December 1879, Mary wrote, "Duncan has not seemed as well of late . . . for the last month the change for the worse has been very perceptible."

Yet he continued to work on publishing the academy's proceedings. He completed the work on volume two virtually single-handedly, setting most of the type himself on the family's printing press in the basement of Woodlawn. Still, his mother chastised the academy in her 1880 presidential address: "The enlarged scope given to this volume has exposed

its editor, Mr. J. D. Putnam, to much extra labor and expense, which it is no more than simple justice should be reasonably shared by other members of the Academy who are equally interested in an enterprise which has given character and reputation to the Academy abroad, as well as adding to the library in the way of exchanges, what in a pecuniary point of view is worth at least double its actual cost."

Mary Putnam could not forestall the inevitable. By November 1881 Duncan could rarely leave Woodlawn. He worked on volume three from his bed. On November 20, Mary wrote to her brother that Duncan "has been very anxious this year to get out a 3rd vol of the Proceedings of the Academy," but she admitted that "he is utterly helpless—I have to do every thing for him . . . the last time he attempted to go upstairs it [his pulse] rose to 140—he is very feeble & greatly bloated & has suffered every thing, the last was an attack of shingles." Doctors soon gave up any chance of recovery, but she rejected their judgment. Another letter to her brother, on December 9, stated that Duncan "revived his interest in his publication last week & has employed a type setter & hopes to get out Vol. 3 1st part soon. . . . Altho the Drs. give him up I won't." The following day, Duncan died.

Tributes to Duncan poured in. He was repeatedly described as accurate, deliberate, earnest, thorough, systematic—certainly all compliments for a scientific mind—but also modest, gentle, resignedly cheerful, and unflaggingly determined. His old teacher, W. H. Pratt, said, "He labored to build up the Academy not as an end, but as



a means to the great end, 'the increase and diffusion of knowledge.'" Another colleague wrote, "His talents at first fostered by the Academy, his only alma mater, and by the affectionate solicitude of its leading spirits, he soon so far outstripped his fellows that on his shoulders alone rested most of the burden and responsibility of the growing institution."

Although Duncan's scientific publications were considered "not voluminous," he had collected some 25,000 specimens of insects, had focused on a particular order intermediate between scorpions and spiders (*Solpugidae*), and had amassed detailed notes and an extensive bibliography on the group. As Pratt said, "He was, up to the time of his death, the only person in this country who had made much progress in the study of the family of *Solpugidae*."

Mary Putnam had devoted much of the previous 26 years to nurturing her frail, eldest son. Now she was desolate. She fell into a deep depression and stayed with relatives in New Orleans for three months. During her absence the academy appointed her to succeed Duncan as chair of the publications committee.

Throughout the next five years, Putnam tirelessly pursued her assignment. She began by finishing volume three as a memorial to Duncan. With little aid from other members, and with no training as a scientist or editor, she seemed surprised by the huge undertaking publishing required and found that the "weight and responsibility" of putting out a quality volume to represent the academy and her son was "almost crushing." Nonetheless, she persevered. In late October 1882 she

wrote proudly to her sister, "I sent you sheets of the Memorial Volume for my gift. It is more than gold to me, the perpetuating the memory of such a boy. . . . I wonder if any one ever did so honor and love a boy. God bless his precious memory!"

Putnam then began raising funds for a fourth volume. Funding did not come easily. "There are plenty of men here who could pay that amount & not feel it," she lamented, "but I have asked so repeatedly for help I'm ashamed to do so again." She again dreamed of a benefactor to endow the academy and ensure its survival.

Mary's husband, Charles, became much more active in the academy when he was elected president in 1885. His interest grew mostly from what the Putnams now considered their duty—to defend the academy in light of allegations of fraudulent prehistoric tablets and other artifacts in its collection. Despite assertions by the Smithsonian Institution and several prominent archeologists that the tablets were fakes, Charles used all of his influence as a community leader and skill as a lawyer to defend their authenticity. The Putnam family felt that a fraud would tarnish the academy's reputation and, by association, their son's legacy. (Ironically, Putnam's insistent defense of the objects effectively ended the academy's existence as a research institution by causing it to lose a good deal of respect in scientific circles.)

In January 1886 Charles Putnam again accepted the office of president despite Mary's worries over his health. She was tired too. As she reflected that July, "It will be about nine years since my last 'Kettledrum' [fundraiser]. . . . When I think of all I have lost in these nine years my heart shrinks

from the effort, but it must be done. I must work to live; the Academy must have money, and who will give it to us?"

The fight over the tablets and the initiation of a \$500 salary for a curator had taken much of the money she had raised in 1885. Therefore, when she finally presented the finished volume four of the proceedings in October 1886, she did so with an outstanding debt of \$250. With most of its original members having died or moved away from Davenport, the academy faced its biggest crisis yet to survive. The next month Putnam announced a new subscription plan to raise \$400 a year for five years, in order to "obviate repeated appeals to the public," she explained. As expected, the board approved the plan and placed her in charge of the campaign. "Oh, that I could know some of the mysterious joys of a true scientist and a true artist," she wrote to her husband, "but I don't believe it was meant I should classify or arrange anything unless maybe a subscription paper."

Her subscription effort progressed well. In a letter to her sister-in-law, Mary Putnam Bull, she wrote that "\$350 a year has been subscribed without much effort. I shall hope to get at least \$400 before another week, but I have been too busy sewing to attend much to other matters." But she continued to wish for an endowment: "I often wish I were rich. I would never see that boy's [Duncan's] institution suffer for the want of so little; but it will be endowed some day; and his name will live as it ought to live when marble monuments have perished and monumental fortunes have crumbled away. . . . It is five years since we laid him away, but oh! how his presence haunts my dreams."



Putnam soon fulfilled the \$400 subscription commitment for the year. Pleased by the support of the community, she seemed assured that the academy was back on the right path. Then her calm was shattered on the morning of June 3, 1887, when Woodlawn burned to the ground. The fire claimed most of the Putnams' belongings, their cherished library, and nearly all of Duncan's correspondence, writings, and drawings.

Only six weeks later, Charles died, following a short illness. Left alone with her seven remaining children and stunned by the loss of home and husband, she wrote to her sister-in-law: "At times all my interest in life seems to have died within me & this world looks so dark & unsatisfactory. I really have lost all ambition for any thing & have to rouse every energy to rise in the morning."

Putnam attempted to occupy herself with work. Without a spouse, she felt even more responsible for her children's education and growth, and she resolutely determined that "the work of life must go on; these dear children must be helped to maturity."

Still, her energies were gradually depleted. From 1888 to 1891 she spent most of her time away from Davenport, first to stay with her sick sister in Jacksonville, Illinois, and then to take some time for herself to travel overseas and recuperate.

In her absence the academy

faltered. Fewer and fewer supporters remained to fund it. Longtime member and academy curator W. H. Pratt became increasingly discouraged and, after the death of yet another life member, he sadly wrote to Putnam in Jacksonville:

PUTNAM MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND NATURAL SCIENCE, DAVENPORT, IOWA



Joseph Duncan Putnam (circa 1875-1880).

*"Putnam united . . . the simplicity of the child, with the maturity of the man. Thus, while in ordinary business transactions he knew little and cared less for what is known as sharp-dealing . . . no one was more exact in the minutiae of accounts especially relating to scientific operations."*

—C. C. Parry

"Our circle is growing very small, however, as long as any remain we must do what we can." Pratt added that the remaining members had considered "stopping the expenses, though the little work we are doing would stop, and the growth of the library, &c. yet the Society could continue its exist-

ence, & perhaps might sometime revive."

Putnam's travels in Europe reinvigorated her. As she viewed the great museums and libraries of Europe, she was pleased to find the academy's proceedings on the shelves of many. On her return home to Davenport in 1891, she began a new five-year subscription paper to fund the academy's work. In her absence the curator's salary had not been entirely met, so she immediately raised the funds to cover it and then initiated plans to produce a cumulative index for the proceedings.

In December 1892 she reluctantly began arrangements for the academy's anniversary. "I'm so sorry I undertook the Academy entertainment just now," she remarked, "but a twenty-fifth anniversary does not often occur. The weather is beastly, yet I have to go out in it for the last things." A fall from a streetcar that afternoon meant that she missed the event, but she confessed a few days later that "I love the Academy better today than when my dying boy almost breathed its name with 'Mother'

from his parting breath—it was his legacy to me. When I thought I was killed [from the fall] the other day I was glad that the Academy had a new coat of paint on it."

When her sister-in-law, Mary Putnam Bull, bequeathed \$10,000 to her "as a memorial to my brother, Charles E. Putnam, and nephew, J.



Duncan Putnam," Mary Putnam used the money to establish the Putnam Memorial Fund to carry on the publication of the proceedings. No longer would she have to raise thousands of dollars in \$3 and \$5 subscriptions, canvassing her increasingly uninterested neighbors and acquaintances for donations. Now it could survive off the endowment.

Nevertheless, as the 19th century drew to a close, the academy seemed to many to have outlasted its usefulness. It no longer held much respect as a research institution, and its scientific leadership had largely disappeared. Few of the pioneering members who had contributed to its early research survived. The Bull endowment now ensured funding for the proceedings, but few members besides Mary Putnam were enthusiastic. The proceedings no longer functioned as a vehicle for academy members to share their research findings with the larger scientific community. Once filled with articles written almost exclusively by local academy members, the newer volumes now included articles solicited from professional scientists who had no connection to the academy.

Without the resources of a large university nearby to tie it to the broader scientific community, the academy could not hope to survive—much less flourish—as a research institution. But this was

not unique to Davenport's academy. As Daniel Goldstein points out, "The dominant role of the university [in America] for both training and employing scientists by the end of the century weakened the scientists' ties to the local academies which had once been their principal professional affiliation."

Still, the Davenport academy's collections of natural history, archeological, and local history artifacts continued to expand and fill the already limited space in the academy building. Putnam, of course, had a solution in mind. As

Science Hall on December 14, 1900. That same year Putnam was again elected president.

Although the academy no longer provided original research, it had greatly expanded its role of sponsoring cultural events and educational programming for the public. More than ever before, its scientific lectures attracted a respectable number of people and also turned a small profit (even though it relied on outside lecturers and served

mainly as a sponsor). Putnam devoted most of her time to fundraising, attempting to reinvigorate a science program for children, refurbishing old exhibits, and arranging for new ones. On February 19, 1903, for example, an exhibit on Indian basketry that she had planned and managed opened to the public.

The next evening, after spending the day at the academy, Mary Putnam died quietly at her home. She was 71.

Members of the academy members draped the entrance to their building in black in honor of their president and leader. A friend remembered her as a "noble and beautiful mother" who found time "to magnetize a careless western community and inspire them to rear an institution devoted to pure science." As her daughter, Elizabeth, recalled, "What

PUTNAM MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND NATURAL SCIENCE, DAVENPORT, IOWA



Ruins of Woodlawn, June 1887.

*"Nothing further could be done but watch the building swiftly succumb to the fierce flames. . . . The destruction was complete."*

—Davenport Daily Gazette, June 4, 1887

early as 1893, when the Presbyterian church next door to the academy began planning to move, Putnam had set her sights on acquiring the building for the academy. After years of negotiation, she finally secured possession. The old church was connected to the original academy building by a new passageway and dedicated as





**Mary Louisa Duncan Putnam (photo taken circa 1887-1891).**

*"At times all my interest in life seems to have died within me & this world looks so dark & unsatisfactory. I really have lost all ambition for any thing & have to rouse every energy to rise in the morning."*

*—Mary Putnam to her sister-in-law, August 1887*



PUTNAM MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND NATURAL SCIENCE, DAVENPORT, IOWA



PUTNAM MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND NATURAL SCIENCE, DAVENPORT, IOWA



Historical and natural history exhibits, 1900-1910.

*"The people of this city should be proud of the Academy. . . . We have the old building, we have the new building and we have the museum—one of the best, according to its size, to be found in the whole country."*

*—Frederick Starr, at dedication of Science Hall, December 14, 1900*



people might think of her simply never occurred to her. What they thought of her children or of the Academy was another matter."

With her seven remaining children already provided for, Putnam's will left the academy practically all of her property in trust and designated that most of the income from her bequest be used in the preservation of entomological specimens and, more importantly, "for the publication and distribution of the papers and transactions of the Academy" and, in honor of Duncan, that "at least one paper in each volume published be upon some entomological subject."

Although the academy ceased publication of the proceedings only eleven years later, the generous trusts left by Putnam, and by her son William Clement Putnam, who died in 1906, placed the academy on a firmer financial base. Another son, Edward K. Putnam, car-

ried on as director of the academy from 1906 until 1938, during which time it was renamed the Davenport Public Museum. In 1974, the museum's board again renamed the institution, as the Putnam Museum, and it continues to flourish today as one of the largest regional museums in the Midwest.

In the long history of the Putnam Museum of History and Natural Science, no one has expended more effort or given the institution more love than Mary Louisa Duncan Putnam. At a time when society still valued women primarily as mothers and keepers of the home, Putnam was among those elite women who expanded her role to direct the course of moral and cultural events in the public realm. Deeply devoted to the rearing and development of her children, especially Duncan, she went outside the home to meet her responsibilities as a mother. ❖

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#### NOTE ON SOURCES

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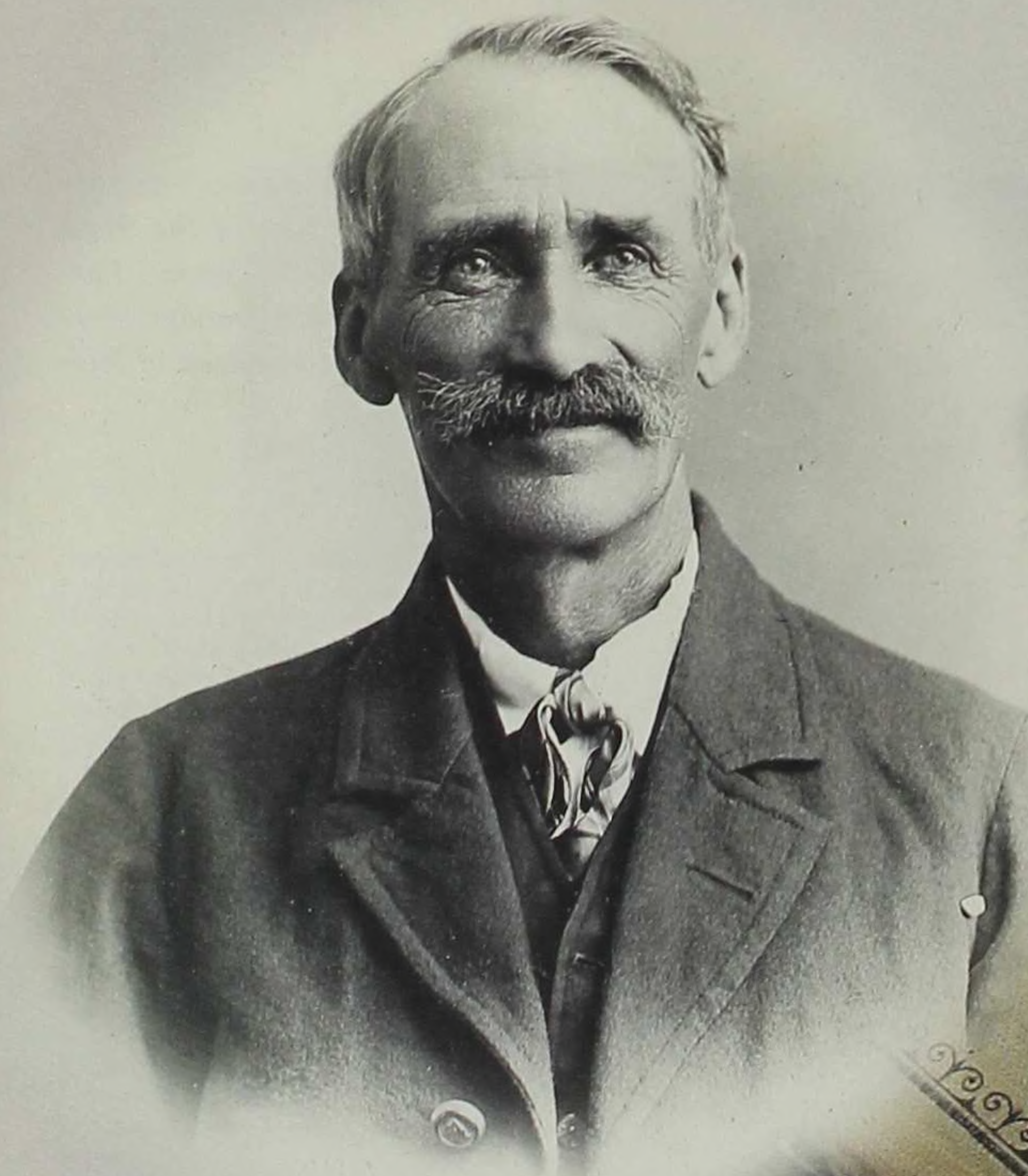


Putnam's funeral service at the Davenport Academy of Science, February 1903.

*"For the last quarter of a century [Mary Louisa Putnam] has planned, canvassed, toiled and often has literally lived for this magnificent institution."*

—Eulogy for Putnam





June 1863.  
 Washed a new tub, 20th small gun tumbler broke 50c.  
 by James Pedman, 14 Sun Wm Stanley & I took mares to  
 Purnham's & I hunted for Bird Cows with a calf, found one  
 calf but it ran away & I could not find it. 15 Mon S. H. King  
 & I hunted soot calf found it & brought them home. 16  
 5 day Eggs 25. made bell collar & put bell on Nip & turned  
 her out. Sun & I cut out our lines & divided our salt.  
 saw on my tick for wts. 16 Tue went to Salem to work  
 at Dr. Siveter mowing grass. 17 Wed AM raking hay  
 PM hauling hay 18 Fri fix the boy shed & fence. 19 Sat  
 finish flood gate & chopped & burned 1 saw boy to  
 I quit then pick a basket of cherries 20 Sat. came home  
 got my gun at Mr. Childs he brought it from Mr. Purnham  
 I went to creek A. washing. then to spring rain a  
 little, made your window. 21 Sun home all day 22  
 Mon hauled 1 of my hoots & plow in my corn 23 Tue plow  
 corn 24 Wed plow corn & went to Conley's 25 Thu plow